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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes findings of a nationwide survey designed to assess public opinion regarding nonpublic school education. In February 1969, interviews with 1,505 adults were conducted by Gallup International in a variety of communities throughout the nation. Responses revealed the public's level of information concerning nonpublic schools; its opinions regarding the quality, cost, and value of private school education; and its reasons for preferring either public or private education. Percentage breakdowns are given for responses by the entire sample and by a subsample of respondents from communities where private, parochial, and public schools are all present (approximately one-third of the nation). (JH)

FORM 0801

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How the Public Views Nonpublic Schools

A Study
of the
American
Independent
School

6 Appian Way
Cambridge
Massachusetts
02138

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A STUDY OF THE AMERICAN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

Foreword

Discussions about the relative merits or demerits of private as compared with public education commonly rest on assumptions regarding public attitudes which have never been carefully surveyed. How much does the public know about private schools? What does it think of them? Answers to these questions have been either purely conjectural or reflections of personal bias. In view of the intense current debate about all kinds and all levels of education it becomes increasingly important to have an accurate assessment of what people the country over do in fact think and believe. To this end Gallup International was commissioned by this Study to conduct a national survey of how the public views nonpublic schools. A summary of the important findings, adapted from the text of the Gallup Report, is presented here.

Fortunately, CFK, Ltd., also engaged Gallup International to conduct "A Survey of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools." Field work for the public and private school surveys was done at the same time, utilizing the same sample and interviewers. So for the first time valid information is available regarding the public's knowledge and opinions about its schools, public and private.

The Gallup survey reported here was made possible by a grant from the Independence Foundation. The Danforth Foundation provides the major support for A Study of the American Independent School. The Study staff is preparing a book length Report dealing with many aspects of the world of private schools. The Report will be based on a substantial questionnaire survey and extensive school visits covering all types of private, parochial and independent schools.

Otto F. Kraushaar
Director

Cambridge, Massachusetts
July 29, 1969

6 APPIAN WAY, CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS 02138 TELEPHONE: (617) UN 8-7600 EXT. 4252 DIRECTOR: OTTO F. KRAUSHAAR ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: A. D. AYRAULT, JR.

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HOW THE PUBLIC VIEWS NONPUBLIC SCHOOLS

This survey, undertaken as part of A Study of the American Independent School, has sought to determine, on a nationwide basis, the views of the public regarding nonpublic school education.

In all, 1505 adults were interviewed by 327 members of the nationwide field staff of Gallup International. These interviews were conducted in all areas of the country and in all types of communities selected by random methods. These communities, taken together, represent a microcosm of the nation.

Questions included in the interviewing form were selected after many pre-tests conducted in the interviewing center in Hopewell, New Jersey, and after a pilot study undertaken in 27 areas of the country. The survey represents the joint planning of the staff of A Study of the American Independent School and the staff of Gallup International.

The field work for this survey was conducted during the period of February 4 through February 20, 1969.

In the early testing of the questionnaire form it was discovered that the general public is not familiar with the term "independent", but classifies nonpublic schools as either "private" or "parochial". By "parochial" the public generally means Roman Catholic schools only, using "private" when referring to schools operated by other religious groups. This terminology prevails, although some non-Catholic denominations, the Lutherans for example, also refer to their schools as "parochial", and the Roman Catholics themselves distinguish between three types of Catholic schools: diocesan schools, parochial schools and private academies.

It was thought best to overlook these differences in terminology and attempt to assess public opinion on "private" and "parochial" schools.

Although parochial schools are present in 70 per cent of American communities, the fact that private schools are to be found in only a third of the communities in the United States posed a major problem. Obviously it is difficult for citizens to make meaningful comparisons between private, parochial and public schools except in communities where all three types are present. Fortunately, most of the areas with private schools also have parochial schools. In these areas respondents were in a position to make more meaningful comparisons between the three types of schools.

For many questions, therefore, responses from areas where private and parochial schools exist are reported separately along with the national results. The sample base for these responses is reduced to 435 which means that results must make added allowance for sampling error.

One other important point needs to be kept in mind in interpreting results, the factor of loyalty. Individuals who have attended any one of the three kinds of schools, or who have children or grandchildren now attending them, tend to be loyal to that type of school.

Government figures for 1965-66 indicate that about 6.3 million, or 13 per cent, of all students enrolled in elementary and secondary schools in the United States attend nonpublic schools. The church-related schools account for the great majority of these students, while a little more than five per cent of them attend non-church private schools. To supplement the very small number of respondents who have children attending these schools, the sample was augmented by 88 interviews with parents who now have children in nonpublic schools. These are useful in the case of some questions, but the very small sample base should be kept in mind in drawing conclusions.

HOW WELL INFORMED IS THE AMERICAN PUBLIC ABOUT NONPUBLIC EDUCATION?

The American public is poorly informed about nonpublic schools. This, perhaps, is to be expected since only one person in three lives in a community where private schools are to be found, and only one student in every eight throughout the nation attends a nonpublic school.

By almost every test, the public reveals little knowledge about non-public schools, especially about private non-church schools. On the other hand, the public is also not well informed about the public schools--even those in their own communities. In a companion survey dealing with the public schools, this finding was reported:

> "Most of the information that the public possesses about the public schools concerns the happenings, the news, reported in the newspapers or through other media. Knowledge about education itself is very limited, at least the kind of knowledge that has to do with the curriculum and goals of modern education." [1.]

In this same survey dealing with the public schools, it was found that four in ten of those interviewed (41%) said they knew "very little" about the public schools in their own community. On the other hand, nearly two-thirds say they would like to know more about their schools. Mostly they want the kind of information that is seldom reported--the nature of the courses taught, innovations being tried, changing college admittance requirements, the meaning of test scores, changes in the curriculum and the reasons for the changes.

The same situation is found to an even greater degree regarding the nonpublic schools, since less is reported about them in the news media. For example, when those who live in communities with private schools were asked if they happened to know how these schools are supported, slightly more than half ventured a guess. When they were asked about the tuition charged, only 27 per cent made a guess. And only 11 per cent said that they thought loans and scholarships were available.

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1. CFK Ltd., A Survey of the Public's Attitudes Toward The Public Schools 1969 - by Gallup International, Spring 1969.

WHAT DOES THE PUBLIC THINK ABOUT THE QUALITY OF NONPUBLIC EDUCATION?

To provide an index for assessing public opinion about the quality of nonpublic schools, respondents were asked to compare them with public schools. The following question was asked:

> "If you were to rate the quality of education received by children in your community, which one would you say is best--private, parochial, or public school?"

For the national sample the results were:

PRIVATE SCHOOL	14%
PAROCHIAL SCHOOL	15%
PUBLIC SCHOOL	43%
ALL EQUAL	20%
NO OPINION	8%

Obviously, since the question calls for a comparison it is relatively meaningless in communities where private and parochial schools do not exist. By comparing the national response to that from communities where all three types of schools are present--about one-third of the nation--it can be seen that nonpublic schools are regarded much more favorably where they are known. For these communities the answers are as follows:

PRIVATE SCHOOL	24%
PAROCHIAL SCHOOL	21%
PUBLIC SCHOOL	32%
ALL EQUAL	20%
NO OPINION	3%

If the choice of private school (24%) is combined with the choice of parochial school (21%), then the vote for the nonpublic school is substantially larger than that given the public school (32%).

The size of the private school vote is noteworthy. If one takes account of the loyalty factor discussed earlier and bears in mind that only 2 per cent to 3 per cent of the students in these communities, on the average, attend private schools, the endorsement of the latter is all the more striking.

Each person was asked to give the reasons for his choice. The reason cited most often by those who believe the quality of education is best in the private school is that the student receives more personal attention. In the case of parochial schools, the reason cited most often is discipline. Those who believe the public schools are best most often give as their reason the association students have with all segments of society.

Surprisingly, rather few choices are based upon the educational program, or the quality of education per se. In fact, there is a strong tendency to judge quality by the way students are dealt with as individuals.

IS THE PRIVATE SCHOOL UNDEMOCRATIC?

Relatively few persons interviewed in this study believe that private schools are essentially undemocratic. Rather, private schools are regarded as a natural concommitant of a pluralistic society.

Although many believe that one of the virtues of the public schools is that they "bring all classes of people together" and that they provide a "more true-to-life environment" in which to teach young people, yet those who hold this view would not insist that all children be required to attend public schools.

To probe views on this aspect of education, the following question was put to all persons reached by the survey:

> "As you know, there is talk about taking open land and building new cities in this country. New cities, of course, would include people of all religions and races. If such communities are built, should there be parochial and private schools in addition to public schools?"

This question offers those who believe strongly that the three-school system is divisive and that all children should be enrolled in one kind of school an opportunity to register this opinion.

That the great majority of citizens accept the present three-school system is indicated by the response to the above question. Whether they now live in communities with or without private schools, most citizens register a substantial vote in favor of the three-school system.

For the nation as a whole, the vote is:

Yes, there should be parochial and private schools	72%
No, there should not be parochial and private schools	23%
No opinion or No answer	5%

The vote for nonpublic schools is even higher in those areas where such schools are to be found, as the following figures show. In the three-school area:

Yes, there should be parochial and private schools	84%
No, there should not be parochial and private schools	12%
No opinion or No answer	4%

In each interview, the respondent was asked to tell why he gave the answer he did. Analysis of reasons for voting "No" show that most of those in this group cite reasons that have little or nothing to do with the undemocratic nature of nonpublic schools.

Many, for example, say that the public schools are good and there is no need, therefore, for private or parochial schools. A few voice opposition because they assume that the nonpublic schools would be supported by tax money. Opposition on the grounds that such schools are undemocratic--that all should be equal in education--is limited to about 2 per cent of the nation.

The overwhelming majority of those who favor the three-school system say, "There should be a right to choose."

TO WHAT EXTENT WOULD PARENTS CHOOSE PRIVATE EDUCATION IF IT WERE MADE POSSIBLE FINANCIALLY

Whether a family sends its children to a public or to a private school involves a whole cluster of factors, not the least of which is money. But to weight this factor with great accuracy is far beyond the scope of this study.

At the same time, it was thought useful to try to gain some insight into the importance of money in the decision about the schools by asking this question:

> "If you had the money, or if your children could get free tuition, would you send them to a private school, to a church-related school (parochial), or to a public school?"

Nationally, the responses were as follows:

Would send children to private school	18%
Would send children to parochial school	22%
Would send children to public school	57%
No opinion	3%

The responses of those who live in areas where private and parochial schools exist are, of course, the most meaningful. In the private and parochial school areas these results were obtained:

Would send children to private school	30%
Would send children to parochial school	29%
Would send children to public school	41%

When the figures for private and parochial schools are combined, the total exceeds that for the public schools, but it is interesting to note the balance of enrollment that would result in the three sectors according to this response. Americans seem to place a high value on the availability of alternatives.

SHOULD PARENTS OF NONPUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS BE HELPED BY PUBLIC FINANCING?

The issue of the public financing of nonpublic education is highly complex. In every state where legislation has been proposed, it takes a different form.

To obtain some insight into the way the public would view a radically different approach to the public financing of all schools, the question, stated below, was asked of the entire national sample:

> "In some nations, the government allots a certain amount of money for each child for his education. The parents can then send the child to any public, parochial, or private school they choose. Would you like to see such an idea adopted in this country?"

It should be pointed out that there are many ways of giving financial aid to nonpublic schools, some of which are now in effect. The merit of the question stated above is that it puts the whole issue in a new context, although it has the drawback of posing an unfamiliar plan for financing all types of schooling.

Responses to the above question, which were identical for both the entire national sample and the three-school areas, showed the following division of opinion:

Those in favor of this policy	37%
Those who oppose	59%
No opinion or No answer	4%

The chief objection to this idea is that it might give the government too much control over "what to do and where to go" (20%). The next most frequent criticism is that parents should pay for any schooling that is not public schooling (10%), and that it would raise taxes (6%).

About half who favor the plan give as their reason that parents should have a choice of different types of schools for their children, and about half favor it because they think the plan would help needy children and promote equal educational opportunity. The lower income groups support this proposal to a much greater extent than do the highest income groups.

DO OPINIONS ABOUT NONPUBLIC SCHOOLS DIFFER BY SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROUPS? RELIGION? RACE?

Examination of the findings on key questions dealing with private education fails to show very great differences by socio-economic groups. For example, on the question of having the three-school system in new cities, all the major groups voted in favor--and by substantial margins.

Younger persons are slightly more in favor of the three-school system than older persons (81% aged 21 to 29, 73% aged 30 to 49, 67% over 50). Those who live in the largest cities favor the idea to a greater extent than do those who live in the smaller cities. Roman Catholics, understandably, favor the idea more than Protestants. Actually, no important segment of society voted against the idea.

On another key question, government financial support of nonpublic schools by means of allotments to parents, those most in favor are Roman Catholics. Young adults are almost evenly divided, as are persons living in the largest cities and those in the lowest income categories. But with the exception of Roman Catholics and non-whites, all groups cast more votes against than for this form of financial support of nonpublic schools.

When responses to other questions asked in this survey are examined, opposition to nonpublic schools is not found in any large group in the population. One reason, perhaps, is that each respondent perceives some type of private or parochial school that is available to the religious or socio-economic group he represents.

Analysis of all responses according to age reveals consistently that the younger the age group, the more favorable the view of nonpublic schools.

The number of Negro adults in the general population is approximately 10 per cent. The number reached in a survey of the general population is consequently too limited to enable definite conclusions to be reached. In the present survey, the views of black parents in general differ little from those of the entire sample.

Firm supporters of the position that all students should be enrolled in public schools are to be found, but they are few in number and the arguments they usually advance have not made much impact on the general public.

DIVERSITY, COMPETITION AND NEW EDUCATIONAL IDEAS IN SCHOOLS

The relative advantage or disadvantage of diversity in educational institutions can be examined in two ways: diversity for the sake of offering different learning environments, and diversity for the sake of competition to raise standards.

The turmoil that has engulfed some public schools is not prevalent in the private and the parochial schools. Many observers believe this is the result of the voluntary enrollment and control of student admissions enjoyed by nonpublic schools. Nevertheless, because they have been largely free of disorders, nonpublic schools are cited by the public as examples of the kind of discipline that should be maintained in all schools.

The parochial schools especially are praised for the discipline they maintain. Among other things, private schools are thought to regulate the dress and deportment of their students to a far greater extent than do the public schools. Since "lack of discipline" is currently the greatest

criticism of the public schools,[2] the nonpublic schools profit greatly by the comparison.

The public tends to agree with the view often put forth by educators that competition between diverse school systems increases the quality of education. To shed light on this point, the following question was asked:

> "Some people say that having schools of different kinds in a community is a good thing because the competition increases the quality of education. Do you agree or disagree with this?"

The responses show that for the entire sample 40 per cent agree, 33 per cent disagree, and 27 per cent have no opinion. For the three-school area, the percentage who agree is higher. The figures: 48 per cent agree, 34 per cent disagree, and 18 per cent have no opinion.

The very sizable number without opinions points to a lack of conviction in this issue. Analysis of the reasons given for agreeing or disagreeing reveals that many respondents see no difference in the educational programs of the different types of schools, they are not aware of competition, or of improvements in the quality of education that have resulted from competition. In short, they agree that there is a theoretical advantage, but many have not seen it demonstrated.

Another interesting finding bearing upon the issue of diversity comes to light in two questions put to respondents. The first asked:

> "Which type of school do you think is in a better position to experiment and try new educational ideas--the private schools or the public schools?"

The national sample vote:

The private schools	40%
The public schools	54%
No opinion or No answer	6%

The three-school area voted in nearly reverse fashion:

The private schools	52%
The public schools	43%
No opinion or No answer	5%

The next question asked:

> "Which type of school do you think gives more emphasis at this time to new educational ideas--the private schools or the public schools?"

On this question the national sample voted:

The private schools	32%
The public schools	56%
No opinion or No answer	12%

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2. CFK, Ltd., op. cit.

In the three-school area, the vote was as follows:

The private schools	43%
The public schools	47%
No opinion or No answer	10%

Thus, although the private school is seen to be in a favorable position to experiment and to try new educational ideas, most citizens believe the public school is more receptive to new educational ideas.

WHY DO PARENTS SEND THEIR CHILDREN TO PRIVATE SCHOOLS?

When citizens residing in the three-school areas were asked:

> "What are the chief reasons why parents send their children to private schools?"

the reason most often cited has to do with <u>better education</u>. The 64 per cent who give this reason state their views in various ways:

> "Private schools give children more individual attention."
> "Students get a better preparation for college."
> "Private schools can get better teachers."
> "The public schools are bad scholastically."

The second largest category has to do with <u>social prestige</u>. The 32 per cent in this group make these typical statements:

> "Going to a private school is a status symbol."
> "They want to keep their children in their own class."
> "To get them away from students who fight all the time."
> "Because they don't want their children associating with lower class children."

The next highest category (12%) is <u>discipline</u>. These are typical comments recorded:

> "Private schools supervise their students better."
> "They don't have to stand for nonsense the way the public schools do."
> "Children have to behave."

The next category, into which 10 per cent of the comments were placed, concerns <u>segregation</u>. Typical responses are:

> "To avoid integration."
> "There are no race problems in private schools."

WHY DO PARENTS SEND THEIR CHILDREN TO PAROCHIAL SCHOOLS?

When citizens residing in the three-school areas were asked:

> "What are the chief reasons why parents send their children to parochial schools?"

the reason most often cited has to do with religion. The 78 per cent who give this reason state their views in various ways:

> "Because they were raised as Catholics to believe that the only schools to send their children to are parochial schools."
>
> "No person is completely educated without exposure to all sciences. You can't teach Biology without Theology."
>
> "Because they want them to believe in God and grow up to be nice citizens."

The second largest category has to do with better education. The 13 per cent in this group make these typical statements.

> "Better quality of education and religious education."
> "Hope of specialized education."
> "Teachers take more time with the children."

The last category, into which 8 per cent of the comments were placed, concerns discipline. Typical responses are:

> "Because the nuns are strict and help parents raise good kids, makes it easier on us."
> "Better maintenance of discipline and authority."
> "Better supervision, better moral standards--teamwork in whatever he does."

WHY DO PARENTS SEND THEIR CHILDREN TO PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

When citizens residing in the three-school area were asked:

> "What are the chief reasons why parents send their children to public schools?"

the reason most often cited has to do with finances. The 52 per cent who give this reason state their views in various ways:

> "They are paying taxes and they do not want to pay twice, which they would be doing."
> "Way of educating them most practical."
> "It's the best available for the average family."

The second largest category has to do with availability and convenience. The 36 per cent in this group make these typical statements:

> "Public schools are everywhere for children to attend."
> "Because public school is what we have."
> "It's the most available and convenient."

The next category, into which 12 per cent of the comments were placed, concerns better education. Typical responses are:

> "Better qualified teachers, more up-to-date in courses."
> "Better education with advance teachings."
> "Because of smaller classroom size."

The next category mentioned was broader experience with different kind of people (12%). These are typical comments recorded:

> "Heterogeneous group racially and religiously. There's value in exposure to wide variety of ethnic groups."
> "Kids would come in contact with a wider range of students, rich and poor alike."
> "It's good for a child to grow up with all kinds of people and not live in a narrow world."

The last category, into which 8 per cent of the comments were placed, concerns requirement by law. Typical responses were:

> "Because education is compulsory."
> "Children must attend school until they become of age."
> "Everyone has to go to school, and it's there for them to use."

DO PRIVATE SCHOOLS GIVE STUDENTS A BETTER SENSE OF VALUES?

Private schools often maintain that they can do a better job of building a sense of values than do the public schools. To discover whether the public agrees with this view, the following question was asked:

> "Suppose a child could attend either a private school or a public school. Which do you think would do a better job in building character and a sense of values--The private school or the public school?"

When responses to this question in the three-school areas are tabulated, they show this division:

The private school	49%
The public school	39%
No opinion or No answer	12%

While the public casts its lot with the private schools on this point, it should be pointed out that this advantage is seldom mentioned when the merits of private schools as opposed to public schools are listed by respondents in replying to these questions:

> "If you had the money, or if your children could get free tuition, would you send them to a private school, to a church-related (parochial) school, or to a public school?"
>
> "If you were to rate the quality of education received by children in your community, which one would you say is best--private, parochial, or public school?"
>
> "What are the chief reasons why parents send their children to private schools?"

WHAT KIND OF STUDENTS SHOULD PRIVATE SCHOOLS ACCEPT?

The public would like to have the private and parochial schools take students of all kinds and from all levels of society rather than concentrating on students who are academically gifted or who have special learning problems. Apparently, most parents would like to think that their own children might attend or that they, themselves, could have attended a private school when they were of school age.

The following question was asked of the national sample:

> "In your opinion, what kind of students should a private school accept? Should it exist primarily for the academically gifted, for the weaker students who need more personal attention, or for all students?"

For the national sample the responses reveal this division of opinion:

The academically gifted	7%
The weaker students	22%
All students	66%
No opinion or No answer	5%

In the three-school areas, the results show:

The academically gifted	8%
The weaker students	16%
All students	73%
No opinion or No answer	3%

It is interesting to observe that while many private schools state their purpose to be the provision of rigorous schooling for selected students who will be future leaders, the public endorses a broader mission embracing all families and students.

When the persons who comprise the national sample were asked if acceptance should be based entirely on test scores and grades, they voted:

For test scores and grades entirely	26%
Against test scores and grades entirely	66%
No opinion or No answer	8%

In the three-school areas, the vote was:

For test scores and grades entirely	24%
Against test scores and grades entirely	72%
No opinion or No answer	4%

Another question asked whether family background should be considered. The national responses show:

For considering family background	21%
Against considering family background	73%
No opinion or No answer	6%

In three-school areas, the vote was:

For considering family background	18%
Against considering family background	78%
No opinion or No answer	4%

When this question was put to the national sample:

"Should all children from a given family be accepted, even though some are good students, others not so good?"

the national and three-school area responses were nearly identical:

Yes	58%
No	35%
No opinion or No answer	7%

WHAT KIND OF PRIVATE SCHOOLS DOES THE PUBLIC PREFER ?

All persons included in the survey were asked to give their views about the kind of private schools they would prefer: a boarding school or a day school, a single sex school or a coeducational school.

The first question asked:

"If you were to send your child (children) to a private school, would you prefer a boarding school or a day school?"

The vote of the national sample:

Boarding school	11%
Day School	63%
No opinion or No answer	26%

The vote of persons living in three-school areas:

Boarding school	11%
Day school	71%
No opinion or No answer	18%

The vote of parents with children now enrolled in private schools:

Boarding school	11%
Day school	76%
No opinion or No answer	13%

The question of the single sex as opposed to the coeducational private school produced these results.

The vote of the national sample:

Single sex	12%
Coeducational	72%
No opinion or No answer	16%

The vote of persons living in three-school areas:

Single sex	12%
Coeducational	74%
No opinion or No answer	14%

The vote of parents with children now enrolled in private schools:

Single sex	14%
Coeducational	69%
No opinion or No answer	17%

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